

ROBINS AND RASPBERRIES

BY GRANT HENDERSON

I have enlarged my patch of tame black raspberries somewhat since the summer of 1930. Prior to that time I had been unable to combat the dread disease, anthracnose, successfully, and was a bit wary of tackling raspberry production on a larger scale. However, I learned a few things about growing them that summer, found that I could control anthracnose and other diseases, so the following spring I added several plants to the original patch.

I shall never forget the summer of 1930. I had prospects for a bumper crop of berries considering the size of the patch, but anthracnose is a curious disease. It attacks the young canes, producing small, purplish spots, which later turn gray or dirty white in the centers. These spots eventually run together, often encircling the cane and thereby cutting off the sap supply. The canes in an effort to heal the wounds become rough, and sometimes they crack. While the disease may not kill the plants, it certainly reduces the berry crop. Diseased plants may produce a quantity of blossoms in the spring and all indications would point to a maximum crop of fruit, but about the time that the berries should begin to turn red they invariably darken and dry up on the vines. This was my experience in the summer of 1930. A third or more of the crop dried up. The remainder, however, took on a reddish hue, a sure indication that the days of harvest were near at hand.

And then the Robins came! The Robins, I may say, had been on the premises all spring but, naturally, they had paid no particular attention to the berry patch. A pair of them had reared a brood of four fat youngsters, and these had for some time been shifting for themselves. The parent birds, at the time of the ripening of the raspberries, were busily engaged in caring for a second brood of five. The first brood had enjoyed the first days of life in a box placed especially for their parents in a poplar in front of the house. The second brood was being reared in a nest that was saddled on a horizontal limb of a hard maple that overhung a strawberry bed situated northwest of the raspberries. And how the parents did gorge those young Robins with raspberries the moment they were ripe. The old birds, together with the four young from the first nest, literally lived in the patch. They had not bothered the strawberries to any extent except to wrench the side out of a plump one now and then, but previous to the ripening of the raspberries they had taken every cherry

from a small cherry tree east of the house. However, these were so wormy that they were unfit for use, so I did not complain. But I did grow a bit warm under the collar when they insisted on devouring every ripe raspberry on the place. I believe that those eleven Robins got a fourth of the crop. Loving almost all birds too well to destroy them, I tried a dozen different methods in an attempt to frighten them from the patch. But did I succeed? No! They were bold enough to help themselves to berries on vines but a few feet from me when I would be picking. Once, as the female adult Robin sat on one of the stakes to which the plants are tied, not more than ten feet from me, I snatched off a green berry and tossed it at her, taking her fairly alongside the head. She gave a saucy "kee-elp" and dived into a clump of raspberries and, appearing a moment later with a ripe berry, she winged her way towards the nest in the hard maple.

They were as painstaking at times as a connoisseur examining a work of art. Damaged berries left in the patch were proof of the fact that the birds were critical when it came to the sense of taste. I usually refrained from picking until the dew was off the berries, but the Robins did not wait, and when I appeared they had, as a rule, retired for the day, leaving me a few ripe and near-ripe berries, and not a few mutilated ones. I have often wondered if the young Robins ever had a change of diet while the raspberry season lasted. I doubt it.

A Wood Thrush or so, several pairs of which I have with me each summer, cousins of the Robins, also sampled the raspberries from time to time but they, I would say, served them as dessert; the Robins seemed to place them at the head of their bill of fare. A few Chewinks visited the patch, and twittered joyously over the deliciousness of the dark, wholesome fruit but they, thicket loving birds that they are, loved more, I believe, the shelter and protection that the bushy brambles afforded them.

As stated earlier, I had learned to control diseases, so the next summer, 1931, saw a full crop of raspberries. I do not believe that I lost a quart from anthracnose. But harder than all to understand, though I had the Robins again, nine in number this time, I am sure that I did not lose a pint of berries on their account. Why? A few Chewinks and a Wood Thrush came to feast occasionally, but the Robins, I am sure, gave little thought to the fruit which they, or others like them, had gone wild over the summer before.

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